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AUTHOR Boloz, Sigmund A.; Blessing, Christian
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ABSTRACT

Teachers at the Ganado Primary School in rural Arizona established an instructional team to form a "School-within-a-School" (SWAS). The school is located on the Navajo reservation and serves 450 K-2 students who are predominately "at risk" and limited-English-proficient. Over a period of 8 months, the faculty researched and discussed the concept. Eight teachers highly committed to the idea decided to launch a SWAS. There were three kindergarten, three first-grade, and two second-grade teachers. The philosophy of the SWAS was child-centered, process-oriented, and literacy-based. Teachers on the team visited each other's classrooms, met frequently to plan thematic structures, and engaged in collaborative activities. Camaraderie developed among teachers and students in the SWAS, and transitions to the next grade were easier for all involved. Higher student achievement within the SWAS was indicated by scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test, a district-wide writing assessment, and assessments of attitudes toward reading. The nonparticipating portion of the student body served as the control group. The school expanded the instructional team concept and is now divided into three smaller SWAS. (KS)

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# Walking on Sacred Ground: A Navajo School-within-a-School Model

by
Sigmund A. Boloz
and
Christian Blessing

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**"I'm proud of what's happening with the kids within the SWAS both academically and socially. I think working together pays off. It's nice seeing the real growth that has happened and realizing how much collective work has been put into them."**

**"As a teacher and a human being I have learned to extend my world and become a part of a greater good that is nourishment to the hearts and minds of our students."**

**"The mere act of describing to my peers my goals, along with the activities, problems, and pleasures of getting at them, has been something of a cathartic experience. The empathy, encouragement, and helpful ideas from the other members have made my professional life a lot easier as I discover that we share and can offer one another so much. To discuss our shared feelings and ideas over a leisurely lunch has convinced me that one of the best ways to better serve my students is to work more closely with my peers."**

These comments are from staff members who are part of a unique instructional team of primary school teachers called a School-within-a-School (SWAS). This instructional team was implemented as part of a continually evolving model of teacher involvement in decision making in a rural school setting where the nearest off-reservation town is sixty miles away.

Although the School-within-a-School (SWAS) model is a phenomenon rarely associated with primary schools, the SWAS structure was adopted because it promotes the empowerment of teachers, provides a strong support network within the school, and leads to an improved educational environment for children and teachers. Creating this SWAS supports the widely recognized need of a sound child-centered literacy program.

Higher student achievement within this School-within-a-School is indicated by differences on the reading, the language arts, and the mathematics sub tests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, on reading achievement as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, on our district-wide writing assessment, on assessments of attitudes toward reading, and in parent participation in school programming as compared to the non-participating portion of the student body.



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## Setting

Ganado Primary School, located on the Navajo reservation in northeast Arizona, serves 450 K-2 students in a public school setting. Of the school's mostly Navajo student population, 97 percent are classified as "at risk." While a majority of these students are identified as limited-English proficient, twenty percent of the student population is both limited-English and limited-Navajo proficient. They speak neither language well.

A third of all students come from homes without electricity and almost half come from homes where there is no running water. As a group, rural Native American students are among the lowest achieving students in Arizona on state-mandated standardized achievement measures, and are in lowest in socio-economic status.

## The Need

Over the last decade, the Ganado Primary School has moved from a textbook-centered to a child-centered curriculum model and has continued to decentralize decision making. These trends have resulted in high morale and strong community and student support, especially for the school's emphasis on literature study, writing process, authentic tasks, and thematic units. However, regardless of the efforts made to create developmentally appropriate classroom environments or to enhance staff knowledge and abilities, teachers generally continued to teach from whom they are as individuals.

This observation led us to believe that for schooling to realize significant gains, school systems must also change. School systems can not naively mandate teacher commitment and articulation if traditional school communication patterns, territorialism, and product-versus-process orientations continued to encourage teachers to remain isolated from one another.

The teachers who worked within our building, although well-intentioned and committed, rarely had meaningful educational conversations with teachers outside of their grade level. Teacher-to-teacher communication was limited by distance, familiarity, and time. Teachers tended to interact with others who had classrooms near theirs, who were considered to be friends or to share a similar philosophy, and who have coinciding preparation periods.

Teachers were territorial. Each instructor was assigned one specific classroom. This became her territory and the students assigned to that room became her students. In the comfort of her territory a teacher felt free to teach from whom she is, her room reflects whom she is, and as a result, the teacher tends to evaluate new proposals in terms of the new idea's value to her personal approach.

New ideas from the outside often appeared to be territorial threats; viewed as such, assimilation did not occur. One veteran teacher's approach is illustrated, she revealed, "When I hear a new idea that I do not agree with, I smile and I nod

agreement, but then I close the door and do what I think is right." Traditional school structures encourage this "my-rules/your-rules" mentality.

A product-versus-process orientation refers to the view that each grade was viewed as important because they produce a product: second graders, first graders or kindergartners. Primary education is not viewed as a continuing process to which all teachers collectively contribute and where distinctions among chronological ages are blurred by developmental overlap, but rather as a series of unrelated "products". This product orientation resulted in blaming others for not doing their jobs, rather than on communicating with others to articulate the process.

What Ganado Primary-School did have was student-centered instructional methods and richly-literate classroom environments. However, the need to increase our support of teacher multi-directional networking and the School-within-a-School concept was intriguing and compelling.

**Empowerment**

In an attempt to break the territorial bonds a number of staff members at Ganado Primary School initiated an ongoing conversation regarding teacher empowerment. These were teachers not resistant to new ideas, but teachers who were reluctant to allow outsiders to tell them how to do their jobs in the name of accountability.

One of the factors contributing to the discussion, and a source of hope in the school was that there already was a consensus curriculum which could actually be read and comprehended and there was a great deal of freedom to teach in the manner teachers thought was best, provided they could make an accounting of themselves philosophically and pedagogically. For teachers attentive to both their students and to current research concerning how children learn, it was an empowering environment. Unfortunately, during the first years of encouraging teachers to embrace this freedom, there existed only a small cadre of teachers who seemed inclined to do so.

The staff did not attempt to change or otherwise improve their craft. Perhaps in defense of their own turf, many teachers simply did not want to be "empowered," despite comments made casually in the hall and at staff meetings about not having enough power and about outsiders including administrators, educators, consultants and state department officials "meddling" in their affairs.

There seem to exist a skewed notion about what power was, or at least, what it should be. Some teachers seemed to say, I want power to do what I want, but I don't want to share the responsibility that accompanies power. I want power over the students and the major events of their day, but I want no one having power over me or the events of my day. I want the power to refuse to improve myself, the power to avoid having to make decisions and the power to choose not to take advantage of opportunities which may or may not work toward the end of being the best teacher I can be.

**School-within-a-school**

Teacher sharing is a prominent part of regular staff meetings structure, so it was not unusual for a first grade teacher to distribute copies of an article discussing a multi-year grouping technique utilized by a German high school. The article describes a small group of teachers who were assigned to remain with a group of high school students for their entire secondary career, and were responsible for providing the entire high school curriculum.

During a discussion of the article, several teachers recalled articles they had read of attempts by New York City school officials to segment gargantuan, poor-performing high schools into smaller, independently-operated schools. Those efforts were aimed at diminishing the institutional distance between students and teachers, and at increasing the capacity of teachers to work more closely together in crafting curriculum that more efficiently served their students, who, presumably, they knew and understood better because of smaller student to teacher ratios and increased contact between teachers and students.

Other teachers recalled rural efforts to preserve one and two-room school houses where multi-grade classrooms were common, and educational/architectural innovations of the early 1970s to build schools with open, yet self-contained, "pods" which tried to provide micro-schools-within-a-school. For at-risk students in particular, teachers thought that similar programs might provide students a sense of ownership of their school, social bonding with each other and the teachers, and a sense of continuity often lacking in students' lives.

Several months later, the notion of instructional teams emerged. Ganado teachers were introduced to the concept of teachers remaining as members of instructional teams called "houses" or "schools-within-a-school". The SWAS was a configuration of classrooms representing the entire span of the school. In Ganado's case, each SWAS would include kindergarten, first and second grade classrooms.

For those teachers truly desirous of freedom, as well as a healthy dose of empowerment, the opportunity to organize this school-within-a-school was tempting. While the SWAS offered the possibility of increased bottom-up reform and true teacher empowerment, teachers also saw the danger of the team putting pressure on members who were not contributing to the process or to the outcomes that each SWAS wanted for its students. The biggest concern seemed to be which teachers would be the ones collaborating in the effort.

Somewhat reluctantly, the teachers began walking on "sacred ground". They discussed teaching as an undertaking divisible into categories that were not simply methodological or pedagogical, but philosophical. Could some philosophies be more effective than others? How dangerous, absolutely dangerous! Should teachers from different theoretical orientations be placed on the same instructional team? The handwringing went unabated until someone wisely noted that this was already occurring.

The teachers searched the research literature for more information. However, few articles related to schools-within-a-school, and these related to high school. However, the teachers had recognized a powerful idea and were willing to share their theories. Critical conversations were set in motion.

Teachers shared ideas during our school's annual budget task force meeting. The annual budget task force meeting was the culmination of a month-long process to gather from the various stakeholders how to improve the primary school and set budgetary commitments towards those improvements. The meeting served to promote the belief that all participants were all important and all have ideas worth sharing.

Discussions centered around the piloting of instructional teams. Some were concerned that implementing the idea would create two schools-within-a-school: one group formed by choice and one by default. There also concerns around how teams might be formed.

We spent time discussing how teams might be formed. We had many important questions to discuss.

"Doesn't 'I choose you,' mean that someone was left out, not chosen?"
"But don't these issues exist now, as teachers form their own cliques? Why would the decision be any harder or easier?"
"If some teachers have problems now, wouldn't those same problems be in need of change?"
"Shouldn't people be communicating meaningfully or is it just easier to overlook now?"

By the end of the meeting the group supported the concept. They identified those willing to volunteer and to implement a regular planning session schedule. Interested teachers were given a scale on which to indicate their level of interest and commitment. Interestingly, if teachers were to give up their scared ground, some wanted veto power over the participant inclusion.

Over the next two months the group held four planning meetings. Beginning with eleven staff members who indicated the strongest commitment, the group discussed the importance of viewing the primary years as a process rather than a series of products and of creating a school without failure, without retentions.

Ideas emerged which gave structure to the program. Participants wanted no labels or special rituals to divide one SWAS from another. They did not want to exaggerate the divisions and indicated a desire to tie the teachers within the SWAS closely to the school while at the same time allowing them the option to work outside the team as needed, and while allowing the team to coordinate themes during the year.

Traditions die hard and significant discussions revolved around whether unit leaders (key communicators who represented each grade level) would remain in their roles. It was suggested that units or grade levels would continue to have

their monthly grade level meetings. Units had been organized at the school for almost a decade at that point and had become a comfortable communication device.

After nearly eight months of playing with possibilities, Ganado had identified the school-within-a-school team. The team's first organizational meeting established times for members to begin visiting each other's classrooms, scheduled informal group activities before the year ended, and developed a twice-monthly formal meeting schedule during which teachers met regularly to discuss problems and share educational views and initiated informal extended luncheon and breakfast meetings.

A discussion of curriculum direction indicated agreement concerning the importance of each member's awareness of developmental needs of students. In addition, the instructional team wanted to leave everyone enough room to be him or herself while allowing members to grow into their roles. All agreed to share ideas, to individualize more, to use each teacher's strengths to benefit the team and to watch for opportunities that presented themselves to work together. They worried openly about possible pitfalls of "don't want kids," those tough kids that might get bounced around because nobody wants them or teachers who saw this arrangement as "remediate this kid for me." The teachers established planning periods to talk about what they want to accomplish, to initiate peer tutoring and book buddies programs, and to plan collaborative-teaming opportunities.

**Initial Benefits**

The School-within-a-school was officially launched in the 1989-90 school year with three kindergarten, three first grade classrooms and two second grade classrooms participating. That first year we had problems but most were due to negotiating unfamiliar, often sacred, ground.

As one SWAS teacher describes the process:

> "The difficulty in summing up my feelings about the school-within-a-school project lies in its history as a hazy, evolutionary phenomenon with no clear chain of events. While the concept appeared sensible and promising, not having the benefit of others' experiences made it difficult for us to lay out a plan for the future. I am not sure we ever knew just what it was we were after or how we would get there."

However, one benefit realized at the beginning of the year resulted from the placement of students. Instead of the normal procedure of dividing all first graders each May into ten similar second grade classrooms and sending them off into ten new rooms each year, SWAS team members could begin student-placement discussions as early as they wanted. As one teacher remarked,

> "Recognizing most of the faces in my class on the first day of

school relieved a lot of anxiety. I already had a fair notion of the capabilities and personalities of many of my new students, while they were generally well acquainted with me and with one another. The normal socializing events which mark the beginning of the school were smoother and more natural."

In the open communication among teachers that this program generated, there was much discussion of each student, as well as of teaching styles and special situations that might call for special solutions.

The opportunities for teachers to make these critical observations came from various sources: frequent discussions about students between the "sending" teacher and the "receiving" teacher, teacher review of videotaped classes, and comments provided on "transfer cards" that program planners had devised as a way to transmit important information (strengths of the child as well as special problems) to the receiving teacher. Indeed, one of the teachers benefitted particularly from watching a two-and-a-half hour videotape of the children he was about to receive into his class. Not only did he become familiar with the students as individuals, but for the first time he saw them in a developmental perspective.

Team members often maintained their support after students were promoted within the SWAS.

"I've really kept in touch with my last year's class because I'm friends with the teachers they have and I don't have to go to ten different first grade classrooms to find them. I think they have found me pretty accessible also and it's really helped many of them make the transition from K to 1 plus to know that they have a network of past teachers that will continue to care for them and be involved in their lives."

"What was very successful for me was knowing who the teachers were who taught my students. I felt comfortable going to these teachers to ask them questions about some of my students."

Constant dialogue between instructional team members improved the articulation across the SWAS in a way traditional means of communication could never ensure.

"The fact that our group of teachers have stressed language, reading, and writing as well as allowing kids to explore, work our problems and interact with each other has made receiving the next group of kids a very easy and effective transition."

Another feature of the SWAS which the teachers recognized was the importance to their students of having similar rules, expectations, and requirements, even though they were flexible when it came to applying them. To

achieve continuity in the curriculum and particularly, to assure students of moving comfortably from one grade to the next, the eight participating teachers met formally once a month and informally on many more occasions, often getting together for breakfast or lunch. In these sessions, they planned everything from the thematic structures to be used in class to recommendations for at-home reading. As one teacher stated,

> "Ask nearly anyone about their most memorable school moments and they will recall field trips, sports or game events, first loves or adventurous misdeeds. Few people, from the highest to the lowest achievers, seem to include "learning" or other academic happenings in their reservoir of school memories. When the school-within-a-school organizes and executes events such as a hike and field day down Bear Canyon or a candle-lit dinner followed by raucous dancing to celebrate St. Valentine's day, I suspect that we are providing vivid memories of early school years which will have unimagined positive impact on our students.
>
> Even if those memories serve no more purpose than to raise the expectations of these future parents for their own children, they will be infinitely valuable. It is my guess that, acting alone, I would not have the wherewithal to organize such memorable undertakings, so I am mindful of the value of the collusion which has emerged as a hallmark of the school-within-a-school."

The camaraderie that developed among participating teachers became a source of great satisfaction to them. They all remarked about the close ties that the School-within-a-School brought about. They also commented on the degree of freedom they have been given to make key decisions and to provide direction for the program.

> "As for me, the whole experience really changed my ideas regarding my responsibilities as a teacher. Observing how older teachers worked and played so differently from me was another eye-opener. I got to see that children learn from many people. It helped me to loosen up as a teacher."

In addition to the bonding evident among Ganado's teachers, they also remarked on what the program had accomplished in bringing together the different grade-level students.

> "When we went on our final field trip with all eight classes to the summit, it was just an amazing day. Most of the teachers knew most of the kids. Most of the kids knew most of the teachers. And many of the kids knew each other. And we're used to having fun together. And I thought how lucky the kids are and how lucky we teachers are to have this group of people committed to doing the best we can for each other."

To smooth the transition of our kids from one grade to another, the older children routinely come into younger children's classrooms. They read the books they created to the our kindergartners.

> "My youngsters were so tuned on that right away they asked to make their own little books. And they learned the process much faster than when I worked with them alone."

As a result of her experiences, this teacher strongly supported this aspect of the program. Not only had the SWAS team found that children were natural teachers, but the younger children enjoyed learning from them. Student movement between SWAS classrooms with their hands tightly around pieces of writing or books became invaluable.

**Suggestions for a Successful Program**

It takes time for teachers to develop a team spirit and a sense of cohesiveness. Teachers are used to working in isolation. The classroom threshold of another teacher is not always easily crossed. We were reminded of this when one senior teacher remarked that her fear of entering a team member's classroom unannounced for the first time. We all shared a nervous laugh because we understood.

We experienced some tough moments during our first year, especially after we had passed our honeymoon period. Anyone contemplating a SWAS must realize that there will be friction. Certainly members need to learn to respect each other for their strengths and to work as equal partners. To achieve this, a mediator or uninvolved party is sometimes required but we found that knowing you have support from the administration, accepting responsibility for your own success, and working through problems as a team is successful for us. If differences exist, they need to be aired and, if not resolved, at least brought to a working compromise where everyone is comfortable.

Because we were in an old school built in several phases, SWAS rooms are scattered throughout a large winding building. Our new building was constructed to eliminated this problem. However, for a school that can not build a new plant, close proximity of SWAS classrooms would facilitate more sharing even at unscheduled times. It would greatly benefit the group to have some shared planning time, perhaps a shared lunch, or at least a slotted space once a week, where they could discuss, share and contribute ideas concerning their own thematic units and areas of study.

The principal's presence at some meetings can be very unifying and supportive for the group, as efforts are continued to help the SWAS through the fetal stages. Yet, the SWAS is a evolving process which requires that the instructional team have time to itself.

A team member who has been with the original SWAS offers suggestions for

getting started:

"I guess the question we continue to ask ourselves is what things do we most want to get out of this program, or more importantly, what do we want the kids to get out of it?
My personal beliefs on this are that we want:
. three years of consistent practices i.e. discussion of great literature, interaction, exploration etc.
. avoidance of repetition to prevent boredom.
. to make a child's transition to the next grade to be as free of trauma as possible.
.to have belief systems that are consistent so kids can stay on the path they left the past year.
. constant communication among teachers so we know problems, successes, effective practices etc.
. devotion by teachers and a willingness to try new things and work together for the good of kids.
. to have an enthusiasm that carries over and is conveyed to kids.
In order to achieve this, teachers must be committed to the program. A lukewarm attitude breeds failure."

Our school has expanded the instructional team concept and is now divided into three smaller Schools-within-a-School. The principal and teachers alike at Ganado feel that the program has been very successful and holds great promise for the future. Not only has it fostered common interests among the teachers, it has enabled individual teachers to recognize more forcefully what it means, for them and for their students, to be part of a team effort.

"I feel that there was a sharing of ideas and support that would not have happened between us without that grouping. I feel really positive about the flow of students from the other grade levels into my room and the bonds that formed between the students; the role models that were provided for my class; and the growth in self-esteem on both parts because of that interaction time."

For the students in the existing School-within-a-School, there is no question that the program has strengthen their identification with the school, with each other, and with their teachers.

One of the greatest advantages of school-within-a-school has been that of accountability. Specific problem areas can be more easily and quickly identified, and, because the program doesn't operate in a finger-pointing climate, solutions can be worked out in a spirit of goodwill and cooperation. We feel that everyone would agree that we have succeeded in eliminating the perennial statement... "If

those first grade teachers would have just taught them better." In the traditional school structure teachers could get away without having to specify which of the ten teachers she was talking about. Within the SWAS we just don't find this type of scapegoating. Instead, there is a new notion of accountability: teachers being accountable to teachers. In this environment everyone needs to want the best for the students and we feel that we have provided them with an appropriate and powerful support network within the school which has empowered teachers and as well as students.

> "Despite certain logistic problems and difficulties with various personalities in what was largely a leaderless enterprise, I regard my involvement in the School Within a School as a valuable contribution to my growth as a teacher. I realize more than before that there is rarely a failure or success that has not once been part of my peers' experiences. Somehow, that knowledge prompts me to want to step out a little, to take risks I may not have considered previously. I also suspect that in time the fruits of our efforts will be obvious on the part of our students, and that will be the ultimate determination of our success."

## Conclusion

We have tried to describe a four-year process which has involved many people and a variety of established avenues of discussions. We hope by not elaborating more on our extensive network that we not oversimplified a complex process. Certainly embedded in our school's decision-making process is a level of trust and respect for teachers, who are viewed as leaders rather than followers, and a firm commitment to a developmentally-appropriate, language-literacy philosophy.

If achievement is to be measured by statistically significant gains on standardized achievement measures, then we feel that we have been successful. If achievement is to be measured by the number of excited students running around wanting to share their newest piece of writing or favorite author, then we have been successful. If achievement is to be measured by teachers having the desire to grab hold and to champion revolutionary notions about literacy and restructuring, then we have been successful.

Teachers become better decision makers when they understand the successes and the struggles of one another. To do this, they must have opportunities to dialogue at length in non-evaluative settings and with other teachers with whom they feel comfortable. They must be encouraged to and have the courage to walk on sacred ground. A School-within-a-School provides such an intimate structure.